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## [A Star Less Bright](#)

### **A star less bright**

By John Carlin

That Rivaldo is unloved by the Barcelona fans, as he has been unloved by his Brazilian compatriots, is one of the great mysteries that life holds. A loyal servant since he joined the club from Deportivo la Coruña in 1997, he combines to dazzling effect the two essential qualities of the ideal footballer: artistry and efficiency. No one in the world scores more beautiful goals, more often, than Rivaldo.

Yet last season at the Camp Nou they spent 90 per cent of the time jeering him; 10 per cent acknowledging the brilliance of his play. Which the poor man, long coveted by Alex Ferguson but perhaps on his way to Lazio, simply cannot understand. Most times he opens his mouth in public he seems to be whining about the monstrous ingratitude of the Barcelona crowds. And, by any objective measure, the European and world player of the year in 1999, the owner of the most lethal left foot in football, is quite right to be indignant. Never mind his average of 20 goals a season in the Spanish league, or the far from negligible fact that he has been Barcelona's top scorer against Real Madrid over the past five years, his performance in one game, just one of the more than 200 games he has played for Barcelona, ought to have persuaded a grateful city to erect a monument in his honour on the Plaza de Catalunya.

It was the last league game of the 2000-2001 season - a dire season for Barcelona that could only be salvaged by victory against the losing European Cup finalists Valencia. It was a battle for fourth place in the Spanish championship, which meant a place in the Champions League. A draw was enough for Valencia. Barcelona had to win. Outplayed by Valencia, Barcelona won thanks purely to a Rivaldo hat-trick - for its timing and for its genius the most gloriously implausible hat-trick anyone has ever scored in a top-class game.

The first was a free-kick over the defensive wall into the top corner; the second from 25 yards out, after he had feinted past two players, was a bullet that skimmed an inch over the ground into the bottom corner; the third, in the 90th minute with the score at 2-2, was a flying overhead kick into the roof of the net from the edge of the penalty area.

Still now, more than a year later, it seems hard to believe that Rivaldo did what he did, when he did. But harder still to credit that the man who over the past four years has consistently ranked among the world's top three players - along with Luis Figo and Zinedine Zidane - was treated the way he was by his own fans last season.

Take a game last December against Celta de Vigo at home. Both teams were still very much in the running for the Spanish title (they ended up fourth and fifth) so it was a tough and important game. Rivaldo was playing up front with the little Argentine, 10 years his junior, Javier Saviola. All the way through the game, which ended in a 1-1 draw, the crowd applauded Saviola, a talented young man who, if he is lucky, will one day achieve as much as Rivaldo has. Right from the beginning, before the Brazilian had

even had a chance to hit one of those whiplash shots of his wide of goal, the crowd were on his back.

First there were the dark mutterings, heard around the stadium as a disapproving hum; then, when he actually did miscue a shot, perversely self-satisfied nods all round, accompanied by fans turning to their neighbours and saying things like, 'See? I told you', or 'He's rubbish', or 'He's only in it for the money'; one more failed shot or pass half an hour or so into the game and the Barça faithful start to howl, individual fans crying out 'Go back to Brazil, you mercenary!', and the jeering rises to a jetplane screech.

Here is what Rivaldo said after that game, although it could have been after almost any other game: 'One thing's for sure: I don't feel valued here.' And here are a couple of other quotes, one from October last year, the second - after a period of two months during which he refused to talk to the press - from March: 'I'm not a machine. I don't see why people demand more of me than of other players.'

'I've played lots of games carrying an injury but people don't value what I do for Barcelona. I don't know what else I can do.'

Could the explanation for this apparently vast injustice be put down to the notoriously difficult fans of 'Fútbol Club Barcelona', a fussy, faithless, tetchy lot in the mould of the club president Joan Gaspart, the most neurotic, least self-controlled multimillionaire hotel magnate in the world? Yes, it could. And partly, no doubt, it is.

But then, how does one explain that the Brazilian fans, all 150-odd million of them seem to feel about Rivaldo much the way that the Catalans do? And, to make matters worse, one of the main reasons why they dislike Rivaldo, they say, is that he supposedly tries a lot harder for Barcelona than when he plays for Brazil. 'When has he ever scored with one of those great bicycle kicks for Brazil, eh?' asked a huffy Brazilian journalist last week during a training session at Japan's Saitama stadium before the semi-final against Turkey.

Even with all the goals he has been scoring, the records he has been breaking, in this World Cup, Rivaldo himself never ceases to feel that the world has it in for him. As he disclosed in an interview published on Wednesday in the *Folha do Sao Paulo*, one of Brazil's leading newspapers, under the headline 'Rivaldo takes on the mantle of stardom, but still he feels persecuted'. The questions themselves revealed that he was not suffering from any paranoid delusions. They do persecute him. These are some of the questions the newspaper asked him: Why do you think Brazilians are fonder of Ronaldo than of you? Why do you think you don't get the recognition you deserve? Do you feel resentful towards Brazilian fans?

There he was living perhaps the most triumphant period in his professional life and yet in his replies, instead of brushing off the questions and accentuating the positive, he was saying things such as: 'There are times when the people make me feel sad.' Such as when? 'Such as in the game against Colombia at Morumbi [a World Cup qualifier] when everybody started to shout, "Rivaldo, go away!" I never thought that Brazilian fans would treat me this way.'

But in a later qualifying game against Venezuela, while less openly hostile, Brazilian fans treated him in similar fashion, even though he scored a goal. The complaint arose yet again that with Brazil he was a pale shadow of the player who shone when he put on the Barcelona shirt. A favourite theory was that Rivaldo did not like long trips, so that whenever a Brazil home game came up he would send out his less-gifted twin brother to play in his place. And all this even though, in the end, Brazil did qualify for the World Cup finals and along the way Rivaldo scored eight times.

So if the attitude of the Barcelona fans and the Brazilian fans towards Rivaldo is almost identical, then one must conclude, given that Rivaldo the player is so self-evidently great, that there must be something wrong with the man. Which is why it is perhaps tempting to try and draw some appropriate inferences from his two extraordinarily crude displays of theatrics in this World Cup in the first game against Turkey and the quarter-final against England.

In the Turkey game he fell to the ground clutching his face as if he had been blinded by shrapnel when all that had happened was that Hakan Unsal had kicked the ball at him, striking him on the leg. The South Korean referee, mightily impressed, sent off Unsal. Rivaldo tried a similar trick later on Sol Campbell but the referee either did not see it, or preferred not to.

What FIFA thought it was doing giving him a fine for the Turkey incident roughly equivalent to what Rivaldo makes between getting out of bed in the morning and having his first cup of coffee, heaven alone knows. Never mind why they chose to ignore television evidence that he repeated exactly the same offence four games later in the very same competition. Perhaps they were taking into account the fact that he was only a first (or in the England case, a second) offender. Because the fact is, surprising perhaps to seething Turks and Englishmen, that Rivaldo has no track record - in Spain, certainly - of stooping to this repellently unsportsmanlike kind of behaviour.

Nevertheless, *La Vanguardia*, the big Barcelona newspaper, was prompted to speculate whether the said simulación revealed evidence that Rivaldo was a fraud in a larger sense, 'because he looks fresh as a rose in this World Cup, forcing one to have serious doubts as to whether the injuries he said he had been suffering last season with Barça were real or just another farce'.

Interesting point. Rivaldo did play in fewer than two thirds of Barcelona's games last season, claiming recurring problems with an ankle, and yet for a friendly mid-season between Brazil and Portugal he did turn out - to the outrage of not a few Barcelona scribes - for a busy 55 minutes.

Yet to dismiss him as a fraud is far too simplistic, not to say way off the mark. A fraud does not score that many goals; does not come to the rescue of his team at vital moments, as he did in that game for his club against Valencia and for his country - with that laser-sharp equaliser - against England. A fraud is not defined by his outgoing coach at Barcelona 'Charly' Rexach, who recently included Rivaldo in his ideal World XI, as 'the indispensable man\_ who can be half an hour on the pitch without touching the ball and can suddenly decide the game for you'.

No. The problem with Rivaldo might be a lot simpler. It might just be that he is not very bright. Certainly, to have collapsed, pole-axed, after those innocuous blows he took against Turkey and England was not the behaviour of an intelligent man. Everybody knows that there are two dozen TV cameras chronicling every last detail of every World Cup game. You might fool the ref some of the time, but you are not going to fool the whole world any longer than it takes for a slow motion action replay to appear on a screen.

Even though he is on record as having claimed that he had a special fondness for mathematics when he was at school, the evidence shows that Rivaldo did not exactly benefit from a privileged education. He grew up exceedingly poor, even by the standards of South American football players. Home was in the impoverished far north of Brazil - one reason, incidentally, he has advanced as to why Brazilian fans from the richer and more densely populated south have never taken to him. He suffered from serious malnutrition as a child, which perhaps explains his amazingly bandy, stick-man legs. As a boy ('I will never forget the hunger I used to feel,' he has said) he would supplement the meagre family income by selling drinks and sweets on the beach. When he was 15 his father was run over and killed. To get to his first training sessions at his local football club he would walk 10 miles each way.

Things worked out fine soon enough, of course. He won championships with Palmeiras and Corinthians in Brazil, for whom he has been an international 65 times since 1993, scoring 33 goals. He has also won two Spanish championships with Barcelona.

But bright he has never been. Bright in the widest sense of the word. He does not possess the charisma of a David Beckham or a Ronaldo. As a personality he is flat. He does not reach out. He does not have friends or even allies in the Barcelona dressing room. Neither has he tried to cultivate friendships with the Spanish sports newspapers. Or rather, he has one good contact - a man who works for the Madrid-based daily Marca . With the Barcelona sports dailies he has no special affinity at all.

A leading Barcelona football writer made the point that Rivaldo suffered from 'a kind of autism'. 'In this day and age a football superstar cannot let his feet do the talking the way maybe he could in the past,' the Catalan football writer said. 'He also needs to be a bit of a populist. Rivaldo has no idea how to play that game.'

He doesn't. Watching Beckham in action in Japan, flashing his easy smile and making a point of thanking the Japanese for their wonderful hospitality and so forth (even hinting he might eventually play in Japan), offered a reminder of how much more refined a politician he is than the Brazilian whose left foot is as good, as exquisitely honed, as the Englishman's right. Rivaldo simply has no idea what signals to emit, either off the pitch or on it, to win over the love of the multitudes.

And perhaps this 'autistic' deficiency in him helps account for the foolish theatrics he has lately turned to.' He's been told a number of times that, apart from scoring goals, he has to do more for his team,' a Brazilian journalist explained at Saitama stadium last week. 'Well, in his own bumbling sort of way I figure he calculated that by getting a rival player sent off, however bad he himself might look, he was carrying out a worthy sacrifice on behalf of the team. After all, he would have figured, what better contribution to the defensive effort of my team than to reduce the rival team to 10 men?'

But had it worked? Or, at the very least, had all the goals he had been scoring for Brazil in the World Cup begun to soften Brazilian attitudes towards him? 'Oh, yes,' the Brazilian journalist replied. 'He's scoring. He's scoring beautiful goals too, like he does for Barcelona. He's getting us to our fifth World Cup. It may not last, of course, but for now people in Brazil are growing more fond of him.'

Whereupon a Catalan journalist listening into the conversation said, 'Yes, that's right. But you can be absolutely sure that everyone in Barcelona is now saying, "Look at that son of a bitch! Look at him when he's wearing a Brazilian shirt! Why doesn't he play that way for us?"'

**The Observer**

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